**NATHANAEL WEST'S AMERICAN NIGHTMARE FACTORY:**
**A Reappraisal of *The Dream Life of Balso Snell***

Master's Thesis by Frank Landsman, MA
[Awarded Gold Star at *Engels Seminarium*/American Institute Library]
English Department, Faculty of Letters
University of Amsterdam, the Netherlands
Tutor: Dr Paul Gabriner
November 1988; slightly revised version December 2007
N.B. Please acknowledge the author's name when quoting any part of or deriving any ideas from this thesis, and kindly notify the author by Email: <frankiesmash123@gmail.com>

## CHAPTER IV

## A SURREAL SYMPHONY OF SCHADENFREUD(E)

> The unconscious should remain just that –
> the unconscious. 92
>
> Alexander Woolcott

It is worth establishing that West did *not* regard himself as a surrealist author. 93 :The surrealists held that dreams were a visionary revelation";94 one of the points of *Balso Snell* is that "surrealistic faith in a greater self realizable by dreams" is ridiculed. 95 Balso does not learn anything, he does not die a hero, but dies "the little death" in his own bed. In that sense, *Balso Snell* is a *Bildungsroman* turned topsy-turvy.

However, the insertion of smut and tongue-in-cheek pornography in the manuscript may have been inspired by the early work of that French *surréaliste extraordinaire* who invented the "new laughter", Guillaume Apollinaire. 96 Josephine Herbst, a close friend of West's, has furthermore suggested that

> The use of [scatological] terms and four-letter words was almost a compulsive mannerism of the period … used not only in revenge for a puritan past but as the bullet to shatter the stale frozen mammoths of trite opinions,

Citing Brecht as a precursor, who could top West in his aforementioned debut, *Baal*: "I see the world in a mellow light; it is God's excrement:. 97

This brings us to an important ghost hovering over *Balso Snell*, namely that of Sigmund Freud. The link with the surrealists is more than obvious, for they

> seemed to begin and end in Freud. They considered the eccentricities of the unconscious literary ends in themselves ... In many respects [S]urrealism is a
> continuation of [D]ada in its repudiation, especially, of all things conventional
> and logical. As the Dadaists had attempted to show their contempt for convention by constantly distracting their audiences by noisy *non sequiturs*, so surrealist poetry and prose defy comprehension by irrational sequences of metaphors and by typographical excesses. 98

These irrational sequences reappear in *Balso Snell* in the form of mock-epic catalogues, and the Dadaistic juxtaposition certainly makes for *distracting* moments, in both senses of the word. This has to be seen to be believed:

> Having no alternative, Balso blamed the war, the invention of printing, nineteenth century science, communism, the wearing of soft hats, the use of contraceptives, the large number of delicatessen stores, the movies, the
> tabloids, the lack of adequate ventilation in large cities, the passing of the saloon, the soft collar fad, the spread of foreign art, the decline of the western world, commercialism, and, finally, for throwing back the artist on his own personality, the renaissance. (p. 31)

and, more pointedly, in moments of sexual bliss:

> “O constipation of desire! O diarrhea of love! O life within life! O mystery of being! O Young Women’s Christian Association! Oh! Oh!” [shouted during a sadomasochistic flagellation scene] (p. 27)

And a punctuated Joycean stream of consciousness:

> Yes ...Yes ... Ooh! Ah! ... The Two became One. The One that is all things and yet no one of them: the priest and the god, the immolation, the sacrificial rite, the libation offered to ancestors, the incantation, the sacrificial egg, the altar, the ego and the alter ego, as well as the father, the child, and the grandfather of the universe, the mystic doctrine, the purification, the syllable “Om”, the path, the master, the witness, the receptacle, the Spirit of Public School 186 [both Gilson’s and West’s school in New York, cf. p. 13], the last ferry that leaves for Weehawken at seven. (p. 61)

Complementing the above-mentioned Dadaistic distraction of the audience, and fitting in with the “dream theme”, several allusions to Freud’s *Traumdeutung* (1900-1930) need to be explored. 99

When Balso takes a peep at Mary’s “hidden charms in a public fountain”, it is observed that “through the wood of his brain there

buzzed the saw of desire" (p. 31); later on, he *tips his hat* to Janey, snatching her away (p. 38). It is no wonder that he cannot see the wood for the trees, because this "saw of desire" buzzes through most of his dream life.



In his journal, John Gilson is "continually tormented by the desire to indulge some strange thing, perceptible but indistinct, hidden in the swamps of my mind" (p. 16). In his pamphlet, he distinguishes between the Self and "the chauffeur within … dressed in ugly ready-made clothing … his shoes, soiled from walking about the streets of a great city, are covered with animal ordure and gum. His hands are covered with coarse woolen gloves. On his head is a *derby hat*" (p. 29). [italics mine]

This chauffeur is called "The Desire to Procreate", West's imaginative version of Freud's *Id*, the uncoordinated instinctual trends in the mind. 100

The sty, pimple, sore, and inflamed running nose mentioned by Gilson (p. 28) are echoed by the "Houses of the city of your memory … that are protuberances on the skin of streets – warts, tumors, pimples, corns, nipples, sebaceous cysts, hard and soft chancres" and "the warm knife of thought swift astride and slit in the ready garden" recited by McGeeney (p. 32); the image of the derby hat recurs in the description of Mr Maloney, who is "naked except for a derby in which thorns were sticking" (pp. 9-10), an irreverent jibe at his Biblical origin as an Areopagite in *The Acts*. 101 All of these are Freudian sumbols for the *phallus*, taken straight from Freud's interpretation of dreams, *Die Traumdeutung*; every one of them is traceable to a particular description of some patient's dream. 102

In addition to Freud's concrete examples, elaborately transcribed by West, the Freudian view of "art as negative expression of neurosis or sexual perversion" crops up in two "case histories". 103 John Gilson's "art" expresses his perverse, neurotic tendencies towards sadomasochism and transsexuality, as discussed earlier. 104 Balso Snell's endless stream of anal jokes and "pooh-pooh fun" point to a regressive anal and excremental fixation.

This happens to be a normal stage of development among children aged two to three. Balso is middle-aged. His loss of decorum may thus be explained by a state of sexual neurosis, supported by the hysterical speeches addressed to his *childhood* sweetheart Mary. This theory might also account for the complexity of symbols and allusions in Balso's dream life that seem so out of character with his basic philistinism. As Freud observed, "just as the presence of dementia praecox facilitates the interpretation of [dream] symbols, so an obsessional neurosis makes it more difficult". 105

An alternative diagnosis seems more in keeping with Balso's actual age. This concerns a form of dementia known as Alzheimer's Disease, which may occur around the age of forty and entails a similar loss of decorum and regressive tendencies towards the excremental period.

As West himself put it in 1933, "Psychology can become something much more important [to the novelist]. The great body of case histories can be used in the way ancient writers used their myths. Freud is your Bullfinch [American author of *Age of Fable* (1855)". [106] West was apparently well



acquainted with the literature on sexual psychopathology, judging by his skilful description of another neurotic "reactive type" character in *The Day of the Locust* (published eight years after *Balso Snell*) and by references to the sexologists Havelock Ellis and Baron Richard von Krafft-Ebing in *Miss Lonelyhearts.* [107]

Coming back full circle to Balso's entrance to the cradle of European culture as personified by the "Anus Mirabilis" of the Trojan horse, one last Freudian allusion should be mentioned. For Balso's mock-epic quest for the "womb of culture" is based on a familiar mistake made by children. As Freud explained in his "Theories of Birth" in *Three Essays on the Theory of Sexuality* (1905),

> In childhood the female genitals and the anus are regarded as a single area – the 'bottom' (in accordance with the infantile 'cloaca theory'); and it is not until later that the discovery is made that this region of the body comprises two separate cavities and orifices [108]

which may be interpreted as one more nail in Balso's pram, fitting in with his infantile behaviour already noted.

These literary fruits of Freud's labour may have been apparent in European literature, notably in Italo Svevo's *La coscienza di Zeno* (1923), but by American standards West's creative adaptations are surely remarkable. It should be added that Freud himself was well aware of the comic potential of dream symbols, particularly phallic imagery, for in "The Dream-Work: Representation by Symbols" he suggests that "it is highly probable that all complicated machinery and apparatus occurring in dreams stand for the genitals (and as a rule male ones) – in describing which dream-symbolism is as indefatigable as the 'joke-work' [the psychological processes involved in the production of jokes]". [109]

Yet West should not be mistaken for a Freudian writer in the orthodox sense. Freud himself considered his views liberating, as did W.H. Auden, who elegiacally praised:

For about him at the very end were still
Those he had studied, the nervous and the nights,
And shades that still waited to enter
The bright circle of his recognition
.....
To us he is no more a person
Now but a whole climate of opinion
Under whom we conduct our differing lives

But West's Freudian imagery exclusively conjures up an atmosphere of nightmarish ugliness, of disgusting perversion. [110] All images share



connotations of pain, irritation, and disease. What is more, every single act of sex is portrayed as hideous, *pace* Janey Davenport's romanticizing derived from pulp fiction or Miss McGeeney's silly blend of "Arabian Nights" lyrical display and Molly Bloom-like surrender to the flesh (p. 60). Balso, John, Mary, and Beagle are all in for a session on Freud's psychoanalytic couch for
their respective regression, perverse tendencies, frigidity relieved by pornographic visions, and hysterical schizophrenia culminating in loss of identity and alcoholism. It is quite amusing to picture *Herr* Doctor Freud scribbling away like mad to catch all the salient details of Balso's dream life, a vision clearly intended by the avalanche of Freudian allusions noted above. [111] One might actually criticise West for tipping his hat a trifle too diligently to (the then fashionable) Freud, although his *spielerei* has only been noticed in a vague way by one single critic, [112]

West's profoundly obscene sense of humour was intended as a deliberate dissociation from English humour that, in his view, had "always prided itself on being good-natured and in the best of taste". This British humour culminated in "the whimsical family jokes (tongue in cheek, hand over heart, good-fellows all) [that had] dominated American literature for much too long" to West's taste. [113]

A nasty kick against the shins of the prudish is a (yet unspotted) reference to Carroll's *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* and *Through the Looking-Glass*, implied by West himself: "the mechanism used [in *Balso Snell*] – an "anywhere out of the world" device [114] – makes a formal comparison with Lewis Carroll possible ... Balso Snell escapes the real world by entering the Wooden Horse of the Greeks which he finds in the tall grass surrounding the walls of Troy". [115] Similar to Alice's adventures "down the rabbit-hole under the hedge" (talk about Freudian imagery), Balso pops down the "horse's hole" (both are described as a tunnel) in the tall grass and the remainder of the story could well be titled "And What Balso Found There". [116]

The frantic narrative pace, the continuous allusions to world literature and the pervasive word-play in *Balso Snell* are closely related to Carroll's works, which were of course not all *that* innocent, as Freudian scholars have shown. Although Balso is the exact opposite angelic-looking Alice, more parallels may be drawn between West and Carroll than either would have cared to admit. Both essentially sketch a distorted, grotesque world riddled with sexual ambiguity and perversity. The difference is that West portrays the destructive power of the libido much more directly than Carroll, who implied certain tendencies and obsessions through oral, "cannibalistic" metaphors. [117] In the long run, these might prove more powerful than West's "shocking" verbal ammunition once aimed at the fastidious British readers of yore.



It should be stressed that West's description of human (sexual) relations is decidedly one-sided and pessimistic. If the sado-masochistic antics between John Gilson and "Saniette" lie at the root of human behaviour, then only pathological perverts can remain "sane". [118] There is no real love or romantic feeling in the claustrophobic sexual hell in *Balso Snell*.

"I need love; I can't live without someone to treasure and comfort me" (p. 45), Janey cries, joined by Mary's cry from the heart: "What is life without love?" (p. 61). Any pleas for these sentiments, legitimate as they are in themselves, are savagely ridiculed as romantic nonsense derived from pulp fiction and silly expressions of banal self-pity. This particular authorial stance would still be prevalent over seventy years later in the fiction of Martin Amis, who would eventually salute the deliberately inarticulate letters sent to *Miss Lonelyhearts* by way of pastiche in *Yellow Dog* (2003).

This dark, nightmarish view of human affairs cannot be explained as a mere pose fitting in with the cynical attitudes that were fashionable in the 1920s, as parodied and immortalised by British writers such as Aldous Huxley, whose *Antic Hay* (1923) was widely read at Brown University. [119] As W.H. Auden observed,

> West's descriptions of Inferno have the authenticity of first-hand experience: he has certainly been there, and the reader has the uncomfortable feeling that his was not a short visit … Wishes may be unreal, but at least they are not, like all desires, wicked … West comes very near to accepting the doctrine of the Marquis de Sade … to believing, that is, that the creation is essentially evil and that goodness is contrary to its laws, but his moral sense revolted against Dade's logical conclusion that it was therefore man's duty to be as evil as possible. [120]

And according to Robert Coates, West indeed “regarded the world almost as an evil place … he was deeply pessimistic, but grateful to those who gave him reason for hope”. [121]

As Angela Carter remarks in her study of the Sadeian woman, “For Sade, all tenderness is false, a deceit, a trap; all pleasure contains within itself the seeds of atrocities; all beds are mine-fields.” [122] In *Balso Snell*, there is not a single trace of “straight” romantic tenderness or real lyricism to be found; those who are anxious for a glimpse of hope, a spark of romantic glamour à la F. Scott Fitzgerald’s

> The moon had risen higher, and floating in the Sound was a triangle of silver scales, trembling a little to the stiff, tinny drip of the banjoes on the lawn … There was a jauntiness about her movements as if she had first learned to walk upon golf courses on clean, crisp mornings

simply will not catch it, not until the cows come home. [123] For these



sentiments are radically excised from West’s fiction. If they appear at all, it is under the ironic guise of irredeemable kitsch. Perhaps West saw no hope, for the only person who enjoys John Gilson’s sadistic antics, Saniette, significantly dies.

## ENDNOTES TO CHAPTER IV

92. Quoted in *The Ten-Year Lunch*, see Note 35.

93. See Martin, op.cit., p. 338.

94. See Reid, op.cit., p. 35.

95. See Comerchero, op.cit., p. 51.

96. See Guillaume Apollinaire, *The Debauched and The Depraved* [orig. publ. as *L'hospodar débauche et Mémoires d'jeune roue*, circa 1900], trans. unknown (Los Angeles: Biblion Classics, no date). These pornographic *nouvelles* were intended by the young Wilhelm Apollinaris de Kostrowitski as a parody of the "racy" French novels then popular.

97. See Josephine Herbst, "Nathanael West" in Martin, ed., op.cit., p. 19. This is one of the most perceptive and well-informed pieces on West to be found.

98. See "Variations on the Psychoanalytic Theme" in Frederick J. Hoffman, Charles Allen and Carolyn F. Ulrich, *The Little Magazine* (1947; rpt. Princeton: PUP, 1967), Ch. X, p. 180.

99. See Sigmund Freud, *The Interpretation of Dreams*, trans. James Strachey (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1976). The first English translation of the original German version, *Die Traumdeutung*, was by

A.A. Brill in 1913. “The writings of Freud had a profound effect on Americans in the late twenties and thirties …One of the most striking of social and literary phenomena during [this period] was the open obsession with sexuality”, see Martin, op.cit., pp. 131-2.

100. See Freud, op.cit., p. 23 for a structural account of the mind subdivided into the “Ego/Super-Ego (West’s “Self”) and the Id”.

101. See *The Holy Bible* (Authorised King James Version) (Oxford: OUP, no date), *The Acts* (xvii, 16-34), pp. 924-5, in which Dionysius the Areopagite, one of the Athenians who “spent their time in nothing else, but either to tell, or to hear some new thing”, and idolize “THE UNKNOWN GOD: is converted by Paul. Similarly, Maloney the Areopagite blabs on and on about his “idol” Saint Puce, “a great martyred member of the vermin family”. Ironically, he is not converted by “Paulso” Snell, who advises him to “stop sniffing mortality. Play games. Don’t read so many books. Take cold showers. Eat more meat.” (p. 13).



102. See Freud, op.cit., “The hat as symbol for male genitals”, pp. 478-80 and p. 470: “sticks, tree-trunks and umbrellas … long, sharp weapons, such as knives, daggers and pikes … may stand for the male organ”. See also “The genitals represented by buildings, stairs and shafts”, ibidem, pp. 482-4.

103. See the case of Edgar Allan Poe, discussed in Julian Symons, *The Tell-Tale Heart* (1978; rpt. Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1981), p. 226, also analysed by one of Freud’s disciples Princess Marie Bonaparte, in *The Life and Works of Edgar Allan Poe* (London: Imago Publishing, 1949), discussed in Frank Landsman, “Poe’s Tales: Laughter in the Dark”, cf. note 64.

104. The French model for *Bluebeard*, Gilles de Rais and the infamous lecher *cum* pornographer Marquis de Sade are actually mentioned in the pamphlet by John Gilson, p. 29.

105. See Freud, op.cit., p. 467n.

106. See Nathanael West, “Some Notes on Miss L.” (1933; rpt. Martin, ed., op.cit.), pp. 66-7.

107. See *The Day of the Locust*, Ch. 8 (on Homer Simpson) and *Miss Lonelyhearts*, p. 86. See also Comerchero, op.cit., pp. 182-3.

108. See Freud, op.cit., pp. 471-2. For a more elaborate account, see Sigmund Freud, *On Sexuality*, trans. James Strachey (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1977, rpt. 1981), p. 114 and pp. 183-204.

109. See Freud, op.cit., p. 473.

110. See W.H. Auden, “In Memory of Sigmund Freud” in Edward Mendelson ,ed., *Selected Poems* (1979; rpt. London: Faber & Faber, 1984), pp. 92-3.

111. In this sense, West’s “characters on the psychoanalytic couch” are fictional forerunners of Moses Herzog in Saul Bellow’s *Herzog* (1964) and of Alexander Portnoy in Philip Roth’s *Portnoy’s Complaint* (1969).

112. See Reid, op.cit., p. 20. Only Reid notices the “hat-phallus equation” without providing any particular source, adding that “Max Ernst, one of West’s favorite painters, once executed a similar Freudian joke – a painting of hats piled up into phallic shapes that is entitled ‘The Hat makes the Man’”. Martin (op.cit., p. 127) mentions “the nightmarish corruption of the id, which West, like Freud, describes as a fetid swamp”.



113. See Nathanael West, “Through the Hole in the Mundane Millstone” (1931; rpt. in Martin, ed., op.cit., pp. 29-30), p. 29. This is an advertisement for Balso Snell written by West himself, and may be read as a manifesto of the “New Laughter”.

114. An allusion to “Anywhere Out of the World”, one of the song-titles Balso dreams up for his “Round as the Anus” song (pp. 4-5) which, in turn, refers to Charles Baudelaire’s poetic conversation with his soul, “Anywhere Out of This World”: “N’importe où! Pourvu que ce soit hors de ce monde!”. See Marc L. Ratner, “’Anywhere Out of This World’: Baudelaire and Nathanael West” (1960; rpt. in Martin, ed., op.cit.), pp. 102-9.

115. See ibidem.

116. See *Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland* (1865), rpt. in *The Penguin Complete Lewis Carroll* (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1982), esp. Ch. 1, “Down the Rabbit-hole”, p. 16. *Through the Looking-Glass* (1872) is subtitled “and what Alice found there”. See ibidem, p. 121.

117. For observations on the distorted dream-world of Alice and sexual/linguistic ambiguity in Carroll’s work, see esp. Paul Schilder,

"Psychoanalytic Remarks on Alice in Wonderland and Lewis Carroll" in Robert Phillips, ed., *Aspects of Alice* (1971; rpt. Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1981), pp. 333-43. See also A.M.E. Goldschmidt, "Alice Psychoanalysed" and six other enlightening (Post)Freudian essays in Pt. 7, ibidem, pp. 329-436.

118. "Saniette" may refer to Sadeian heroines such as Juliette; see D.A.F., Marquis de Sade, *Juliette*, 6 vols., trans. Austryn Wainhouse (New York: Grove Press, 1968); it is also a *male* character in Proust's *A la recherche du temps perdu*. The obvious pun on "sane" is, of course highly ironical: the masochistic Saniette "weathered a second beating with a slow, kind smile" (p. 30).

119. See Aldous Huxley, *Antic Hay* (1923; rpt. Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1973); see also Reid, op.cit., pp. 34-5 for an interesting link between "the satanic Coleman" and Beagle Darwin.

120. See W.H. Auden, "Interlude: West's Disease" in *The Dyer's Hand* (1957; rpt. New York: Vintage Books, 1968), pp. 238-45.

121. See Martin, op.cit., p. 97.



122. See Angela Carter, *The Sadeian Woman* (London: Virago, 1979), p. 25. In a sense, both West's and Sade's one-sided view of sexuality approaches the *reductio ad absurdum* that Carter spots in the anatomical reductionalism of graffiti, which enlarges only one "aspect, simplifies it and then presents it as the most significant aspect of [one's] entire humanity"; see ibidem, pp. 3-37.

123. See F. Scott Fitzgerald, *The Great Gatsby* (1925; rpt. London: Heinemann/Octopus, 1977), p. 38 and p. 40. Despite their different styles and literary technique, Fitzgerald always encouraged West and S.J. Perelman.

***